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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [SOCI](#) [PINR](#) [BU](#)

SUBJECT: ISLAM AND ISLAMIC EXTREMISM IN BULGARIA

REF: A. STATE 144222

[B](#). COPENHAGEN 1220

[C](#). SOFIA 1681

[D](#). SOFIA 1504

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Beyrle, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S) SUMMARY: Bulgaria's large Muslim community is predominantly moderate and traditional, though both foreign and indigenous Islamic extremists are active in the country. Bulgaria's government is officially tolerant, but Muslim minorities and their problems are often ignored by central authorities. Moderate central Islamic institutions are nearly bankrupt and cannot afford to pay salaries to imams or fund moderate religious education. Islamic institutions at every level are financially dependent on loosely-monitored foreign Islamic foundations, some of which promote Islamic extremism. Extremist activity in Bulgaria includes fundraising, logistical support to terrorist operations, and the recruitment of Bulgarian Muslims. Rampant unemployment, weak moderate Islamic institutions, and a history of discrimination enhance the vulnerability of Bulgarian Muslims to extremist exploitation. Reftel C provides an overview of U.S. and GoB actions to counter extremism in Bulgaria. END SUMMARY

Islam in Bulgaria

[1](#)2. (U) Bulgaria has one of the largest indigenous Islamic communities in Europe, with over 900,000 Muslims constituting approximately 13 percent of the country's population. The Muslim community consists of three traditional groups -- Turks, Muslim Roma, and ethnic Bulgarian Muslims ("Pomaks"). There is also a small Muslim immigrant community that dates back to 1960s Arab-Bulgarian student exchanges.

[1](#)3. (C) Ethnic Turkish Muslims are the country's largest minority group, constituting approximately 7 percent of Bulgaria's population. They are concentrated in southeastern Bulgaria along the Turkish border and near the towns of Razgrad and Shumen in northeastern Bulgaria. The compact distribution of Bulgaria's Turkish population has facilitated the continued use of the Turkish language and a strong sense of communal identity. Ethnic Turks faced harsh discrimination from Bulgaria's former communist government, including a failed attempt in the mid-1980s to force them to adopt ethnic Bulgarian names. Despite this, Bulgarian Turks' strong sense of communal identity and relative economic prosperity has made them less receptive to foreign Islamic influences than other Muslim communities.

[1](#)4. (C) Muslim Roma comprise the second largest group of Muslims in Bulgaria. The majority are so-called "Turkified" Roma) descendants of Roma who converted to Islam during the Ottoman Empire. These communities speak Turkish, practice Islam, and identify as Turks, but are generally not accepted by the mainstream Turkish community in Bulgaria. Because of the complicated questions of identity surrounding this community, census data do not provide a clear picture of their numbers, but sociologists estimate them at between 200,000 and 400,000. Muslim Roma form a majority in urban Roma ghettos such as Pazardzhik, Stolipinovo, and Hadjihasan Mahalla. Though Roma throughout Bulgaria face persecution and ethnic discrimination, conditions in these communities are particularly bleak. Most residents lack functioning schools or work opportunities, and many do not have access to electricity or heat in winter. Reftel D discusses political issues surrounding the Roma community in Bulgaria. The extreme social marginalization and lack of opportunity faced by Muslim Roma in these communities may increase their susceptibility to recruitment by Islamic extremists.

[1](#)5. (S) Approximately 200,000 Pomaks (ethnic Bulgarian Muslims) live in the western and central Rhodope Mountains of southern Bulgaria. Pomak society is village-based and is distinguished by traditional dress and conservative religious views. Repeated historical attempts by Christian Bulgarians to forcibly assimilate them are resented by many Pomaks, who

view strict observance of their religion as an important mark of identity. The closure of loss-making state enterprises and collectivized farms in the 1990s has led to massive unemployment among Pomaks. Poor infrastructure and isolation have inhibited investment, and agricultural reforms have led to lower commodity prices for many farmers. Many Pomaks have been forced to seek work abroad, and it is common for Pomak men to support their families through seasonal labor. Nevertheless, many Pomaks continue to live in grinding poverty. The role of Islam in Pomak society has become more important in recent years as communities have turned to religion in the face of these challenges.

16. (S/NF) Pomaks have received far more money and attention from foreign Islamic groups than have Turks and Muslim Roma, in part because of their fair-skinned European appearance. According to another U.S. government agency, the desire of terrorist organizations to attract "European-looking" Pomak recruits has been a principal motive of Islamic NGO activity in Pomak regions of Bulgaria. The poverty, isolation, and social marginalization of Pomak communities have made some members receptive to exploitation by such groups. A Bulgarian Pomak, Toni Radev (AKA Milenov) is known to have participated in the 3/11 terrorist attacks in Madrid.

17. (S) Immigrants are an increasingly influential part of the Muslim community in Bulgaria. The first wave appeared in the 1960s in the form of Arab students (chiefly Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians) studying at Bulgarian universities. Those who married Bulgarians were allowed to stay and became well-integrated members of Bulgarian society. Some have become influential business leaders, while others, particularly Syrians, have been linked to Bulgarian organized crime groups. A second wave of Muslim immigration to Bulgaria has taken place since the fall of Communism. Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians have been represented, but an increasing number of immigrants and refugees have come from countries such as Yemen, Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Overall, the number of immigrants from the Arab and Islamic world living in Bulgaria has more than tripled from 5,438 in 1992 to approximately 17,000 in 2004. Of these 85 percent, or roughly 14,500, are Muslim. The bulk of these immigrants are male, with an average age of 37.8. Roughly half are Syrian, with significant numbers also coming from Lebanon (14 percent), Iraq (10 percent), and the Palestinian territories (8 percent).

18. (S) A 2005 anthropological survey of Muslim immigrants in Bulgaria estimated that between 2 and 8 percent (roughly 300-1100 immigrants) hold Wahhabi or other fundamentalist or extremist beliefs. According to the study, the "core" members of this group are also among the approximately 400 Muslim immigrants who preach and recruit in the local Muslim community. These missionaries are heavily represented among the estimated 2 percent of Muslim immigrants (roughly 300) who live and work in urban Roma ghettos.

Extremism in Bulgaria

19. (S) Bulgaria's participation in US-led action in Iraq and Afghanistan has increased its profile as a potential target for Islamic terrorist groups. Currently, however, such groups appear to view Bulgaria principally as a fundraising center, transit point, and logistical base for carrying out attacks in other countries. Extremist operations in Bulgaria are facilitated by official corruption, ties to organized crime, and strong traditions of Muslim hospitality to foreign guests, particularly in the rural Pomak communities of southeastern Bulgaria.

10. (S/NF) According to U.S. and Bulgarian intelligence, extremist groups operating in and through Bulgaria include Islamic terrorist organizations such as Al Qa'ida, Ansar-al-Islam, Hizballah, and Chechen rebels. Extremists linked to Al Qa'ida routinely transit Bulgaria between cells in Western Europe and the Middle East. Hizballah draws supporters from Bulgaria's expatriate Arab community, many of whom support the organization financially with profits from legal businesses, smuggling of drugs and stolen cars, and human trafficking. Chechen extremist groups are supported in Bulgaria by the smuggling and drug trafficking activities of local Chechen organized crime gangs, while secular Kurdish groups such as the KGK (formerly PKK) also raise funds in Bulgaria through vehicle theft, narcotics, and arms trafficking.

11. (S/NF) U.S. intelligence sources have also noted official Iranian efforts to radicalize the Muslim community in Bulgaria, particularly Pomaks. These efforts have included attendance of Iranian diplomats at Pomak community meetings and official Iranian encouragement of attempts to form a religiously based Pomak political party. "Vafka" and "Evet", two Iranian-backed NGOs, were reported to be active among Muslim immigrant communities in Bulgaria, but have not been

linked to Islamic extremism.

Islamic Foundations

112. (S/NF) Since the 1990s, foreign missionaries and international Islamic NGOs have been active in the country, some espousing Wahhabism and other extremist ideologies. These Islamic foundations are concentrated primarily among Pomak and Muslim Roma communities, both of whom are more socially marginalized and economically vulnerable than the larger ethnic Turkish minority. There has been little effective regulation of foreign donations, but large sums have been spent on mosque construction, the establishment of religious schools, and scholarships for Bulgarian children to study in countries such as Jordan, Syria, Iran, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia. Currently, there are three legally registered Islamic NGOs active in Bulgaria.

113. (S/NF) Taiba (Taibah), supported by donations from Saudi Arabia, was registered in 1995 as a successor to two NGOs (Dar al-Irshad and Al Waqf al-Islamiyya) which were closed by the GoB in 1994 for supporting Islamic extremism. Bulgarian security services report that the organization's objective is to radicalize Bulgaria's Muslim population, in part by encouraging central institutions such as the Muftiship to become financially dependent on its contributions. The founder of Taiba, Abdurahman Takan, was expelled from Bulgaria for illegally preaching against the state. Post reporting indicates that businesses linked to Taiba operate as fronts for financial transfers to extremist groups in the Middle East, and that Taiba director Hussein Odeh Hussein abu Qalbain has been linked to planning attacks against Coalition forces in Iraq.

114. (S/NF) Neduwa (Neduba, Neoua, Nedlae), also supported by Saudi donations, was registered by a Syrian citizen in 1994. It finances religious camps and workshops and sponsors pilgrims for the Hajj. Neduwa has been linked to an unregistered Islamic school in the Pomak town of Surnitsa that has been dubbed a "Taliban madrassa" by the Bulgarian press.

115. (S/NF) Al-Waqf al-Islamiyya, banned in 1994, was allowed to re-register in Bulgaria in 2002 under the terms of a new law on religions. It is financially supported by a Dutch organization of the same name and is linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, the banned NGO Irshad, and an unregistered NGO known as Al Manar.

116. (S/NF) Information on unregistered and informal Islamic NGOs is more difficult to obtain, but the largest such group is known as Igase (Igassa, Al-Hayat Al-Igathata). Igasse functions as the Bulgarian branch of the Saudi-based International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO). Post reporting has suggested possible links to the Muslim Brotherhood, Al Qa'ida, and other extremist groups.

117. (S) Islamic foundations are suspected to be involved in the financing of two new Islamic publications that appeared in 2005. The publications, "Ikra", based in the town of Madan; and "Miosiolmanska obshtestvenost" ("Muslim Community"), published by the "Union for Islamic Development and Culture" in the town of Smolyan, have quickly gone from primitive newsletters to sophisticated periodicals with impressive production quality. While there is no indication that they espouse extremism, the shady origins and unclear financing of these publications has raised suspicions that they are funded by foreign Islamic groups.

Institutional Challenges

118. (S) The Bulgarian government follows an official policy of equality and social inclusion; however, progress is hampered by longstanding prejudice, lack of funds, and political infighting. Bulgaria's Muslim community is led by the Office of the Chief Mufti of Bulgaria, which operates through a system of regional muftis. The Chief Mufti's Office promotes a moderate version of Islam, but its authority has been damaged by a lack of funding and a recently resolved legal battle between two claimants to the title of Chief Mufti. The Muftiship does not effectively control the activities of foreign religious foundations. In fact, it relies on donations from abroad for the bulk of its budget and often competes with foreign donors for influence at the local level.

119. (S) The Muftiship has faced a continual funding crisis since the collapse of communism. In a recent meeting with Embassy political and public affairs officers, Deputy Chief Mufti Vedat Ahmed estimated that the Muftiship receives roughly 100,000 BGN (USD 62,500) annually from the government, most of it directed to the restoration of

historic mosques. The Muftiship receives a similar amount of income from "Wakaf" community property, and is forced to finance the rest of its budget through donations from the Bulgarian Muslim community and foreign donors. Housed in a run-down building on the outskirts of downtown Sofia, the Muftiship commands few resources and little political leverage. It cannot afford to pay salaries to Bulgaria's estimated 1050 local imams and hodjas and has little enforcement capacity to combat extremist influences in the country's 1300 mosques.

20. (S) Other Muslim institutions at the national level include the Higher Islamic Institute in Sofia and three officially recognized Muslim secondary schools in the cities of Shumen, Russe, and Momchilgrad. These institutions are moderate and receive some educational materials and guest instructors from Turkish Islamic authorities (the Dianet). Bulgarian law allows for optional religious education in public schools, but according to the Deputy Chief Mufti Ahmed, Islam is currently taught in only 35 public schools in Bulgaria, nearly all in Pomak regions. Some local officials report that they are reticent to implement religious education for fear of feeding tension between students of different faiths.

21. (S) Unfortunately, Islamic educational institutions suffer from the same funding issues that affect the Chief Mufti's Office. The GoB does not recognize the Higher Islamic Institute or Islamic secondary schools as public institutions and does not allocate any funds for them. Funding woes are a major reason why over one third of the seats in Islamic secondary schools go unfilled. As Bulgaria's moderate Islamic institutions atrophy, more Muslim Bulgarians have come to rely on unregulated Islamic education promoted by foreign foundations, both in local mosques and abroad.

22. (S/NF) The Internet is an increasingly important medium for radical and moderate Bulgarian Muslims alike. While mainstream websites such as www.islam-bg.net are the most popular, lesser-known websites advertised by word of mouth connect Bulgarian Muslims to extremist Islamic ideology. During a recent visit to a mosque in the Pomak town of Dospat, the local hodja told us that without curricular support from the Muftiship, he is forced to obtain training materials for children's religious classes from the Internet. He proceeded to show slickly produced Bulgarian-language videos on the dangers of Satanism and achievements of Islamic science. He declined to provide specifics on where he had downloaded the videos, but indicated that similar materials were propagated by Islamic extremist groups "who promote suicide."

----- Returnees) A Potential Wild Card -----

23. (S/NF) Only recently have Bulgarian students begun to return from long-term study in the Arab world in significant numbers. Exact figures on the number of students participating in such programs are not available, but they are believed to number in the hundreds. Their return has sparked fears of links to terrorist groups and other extremist organizations. The returnees' espousal of "classical" Arab-influenced Islam has also led to cultural clashes with community elders over issues of religious doctrine and local cultural traditions.

24. (S/NF) Mainstream Pomak imams in the central Rhodope region have told us that they routinely ban returnees from preaching in their mosques and submit them to informal monitoring by community members. With the encouragement of Bulgarian security services, moderate imams also make an effort to track foreign visitors to their regions. In many cases, these returnees reject local mosques entirely, choosing instead to pray at home or set up alternative houses of prayer. Some towns in Pomak areas of the Rhodope Mountains have become "two mosque villages", with new, foreign-financed mosques competing for worshippers with more traditional places of worship.

25. (S/NF) Bulgarian and U.S. intelligence services share a concern that Bulgarian Muslims returning from religious study abroad could form a network of detached extremist cells that would be difficult to monitor and secure.

----- CONCLUSION -----

26. (S) COMMENT: Islamic extremism in Bulgaria is a very real concern, and the U.S. Mission is engaged in extensive efforts to monitor and combat extremism (Reftel C). Despite this fact, the overwhelming majority of Bulgarian Muslims are moderates who are not receptive to radical ideology. However, among certain sub-groups, Islamic extremism could

potentially thrive on the lack of strong, adequately funded moderate Islamic institutions and the alienation of Muslim youth through discrimination and lack of opportunity.

127. (S) Numerous USG-financed programs currently promote ethnic integration and opportunity among Bulgaria's Roma minority. Post requests the Department's assistance in supporting these programs and expanding them to address the urgent needs of Pomaks and ghettoized Muslim Roma. The influence of Islamic extremists in Bulgaria will also be curtailed if the GoB can be persuaded to subsidize Islamic education, return disputed "Wakaf" properties, or otherwise lessen the financial dependence of central Islamic institutions on foreign Islamic organizations. END COMMENT

BEYRLE